

Short Paper#1: Ethics of "Taste, Ties, and Time"¹

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For some of the social scientists, the reading from Bit by Bit² and the other readings on research ethics are probably posing many question marks in their head. On the one hand, a lot of social scientists are undertrained in this realm, and on the other hand, the principles sometimes run against what we believe a scientific research is in social science, specifically, objectiveness and induction process. This short paper analyzes the adherence to the four principles in T3 project and paradox that I detect.

Respect for Persons

One of the major controversies revolving this debate is the lack of respect for persons. Specifically, the research team didn't collect informed consent from the subjects, namely the 1670 students of class 2009 at Harvard College. Though consented by Harvard IRB, it still remains a question of whether IRB itself is representative enough for the entire student body. And a more interesting part regarding this project that hasn't been brought up so often is the moral response of the RAs of this project. These RAs are paid to collect information from their own cohort. They are also the ones taking on the moral condemnation of collecting private or semi-public information from other people. And the respect for them also deserves more attention.

Nowadays the situation is different³. Researches regarding Facebook are conducted on Facebook server and normally these research terms are bundled in the terms of service. In Zimmer's paper, he talked about Facebook as something that people have complete control over their privacy access, and are aware of the status of their information. But the fact is far from what he depicts. It's no longer a networking website exclusive for college students: it's for everyone, meaning your information is almost publicly accessible. It's true in some sense that people put their information under the public spotlight without being aware of it. But it doesn't justify bundling research compliance in terms of service as a way of showing respect for persons either. This highlights how dynamic social network website has evolved. Though this doesn't necessarily invalidate the four principles, it does mean that the contents and standards for each principle have to change correspondingly.

Respect for Beneficence- A Hard Question for Consequentialism and Deontology

Another important point, or maybe the most critical one, is potential harms done by the research, which fall into the category of beneficence principle. There are numerous ways a person's welfare may be adversely impacted by this research. Most important of all is that,

¹ Tastes, ties and times project will be referred to as T3 project throughout the paper.

² Salganik, Matthew J. Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age, Princeton University Press, Open review edition.

³ As you can notice that the timeline indicates that the contagion experiment is after the T3 project. Thus in the *The Chronicle of Higher Education* article(2011), it cites the head of Facebook data science department speaking as if they have found a solution by restricting research Facebook data usage on Facebook server only and imposing no-releasing policy. It turns out this is also of minimal help.

the culture identification can be used to pin down each unique subject in the research. Hence, informational risks may involve people's specific background, preferences being revealed to the public and therefore creates a potential of being used to discriminate people based on their preferences, for example, a subject identified as gay may be rejected by certain firms when applying for a job. In response to Kaufman's response that the information involved in the data is available publicly, it's in a sense true just as what Bloustein's (1964) dignity based theory of privacy claims -- that simply putting individual's information for public access has caused jeopardy already.

We often carry out two ethical standards with consequentialism focusing on the outcome and deontology focusing on the means. Beneficence falls in the former category. But one fact that we probably have to agree upon is that not all subjects are alike. Social science differs substantially from fields like natural science and engineering. Unlike other fields, social science researches may not have immediate market value. Instead it's changing the way people understanding the social system and paves the way for future research. Several papers authored by Kaufman and his team point us to another direction of looking at the way people form social relations. The 2010 paper (Wimmer and Lewis, 2010) on friendship network downplay the role of racial preference in formation of relationship because of the amplification effect of reciprocation and triadic closure combined with other socioeconomic effects. Now it's almost politically correct to point segregation to racial factors and fail to gain further insight into other factors⁴. But the benefits from this kind of research almost lie entirely in its academic contributions, which may often be diminished by others including those from different fields of academia (like Zimmer himself).

On the contrary, due to the fact that subjects studied in social science are human beings ourselves, matters of procedure, method and means are of particular sensitivity. This fact puts a somewhat asymmetric emphasis on the consequentialism and deontology, in the sense that the threshold of benefits is so high and yet tolerance of means in the field is so low.⁵ A better benefit-harm analysis should come from a compilation of different opinions from different fields.

Respect for Justice: A Dilemma between Different Standards

Respect for justice has also been brought up against this research since the class of 2009 at Harvard College takes on the burden of benefits for the society and were exposed unfairly to informational risks. But what the argument seems to inculcate is the act of sharing the data instead of selection of subjects. But the latter is often blamed for injustice or unfairness. Yet people hardly realize that this belief goes against the basic scientific method.

We have different standards for social science research. When we focus on research

⁴ And this is exactly why the paper by Davis, Dingel and Monras(2016) failed to explain why social confliction factor represented solely by racial differences.

⁵ By no means I'm advocating people to give up their right to make sacrifice to social science research. Instead what I'm expressing is that there are different trade-offs between respect for persons and beneficence rules. In that perspective, Zimmer's paper (2010) failed to give us a comprehensive benefit and harm analysis and instead focused on the jeopardy the project can impose on privacy issues.

ethics, objectiveness and the process of induction, where we formulate an assumption and test it without presupposing it in our logical induction, are also ingrained in our brain. And yet wrongful beliefs in principle of justice sometimes render the entire research unfeasible. Respect for justice believes that we should equalize benefits among people and sometimes even pivot toward underprivileged group, for example minimizing harms done to children, women, etc. But sometimes as we differentiate our study subjects, we are also compromising the essence of distinguishing between control and experiment group. For social science research, this can create insurmountable obstacles. The T3 project, can portrait behaviors of particular group of people simply because they belong to the same cohort, and can sustain their living environment and relationship network for four years. The lack of experiment setup forces social scientists to collect information for a particular desired group. If we carry the principle of justice too far, the act of sample selection may be tagged as injustice.

Ultimately, variation is what we are looking for in social science research. Respect for justice is falsified when we are trying to equalize everything and believe that scientific principles should be sacrificed.

Respect for law is a precarious mud that I don't want to get overly involved because it's really not my expertise to talk about laws, though it did mention in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* article, that Facebook now has all of the relevant researches done on their servers which may render the project into a even less valid stance, since the research was not bounded by the terms of use for Facebook. What also requires further attention is the role of IRB played in this case. They confirm that no law was broken under this circumstance and yet there's massive repercussion in academia. It's apparently not a matter of law that troubles people the most.

As for me, I would use the information if necessary for the following reason:

Firstly, his dataset has invaluable information for it not only presents a person's socioeconomic traits, personal preference, but also demonstrates his/her preference overtime and is able to connect different people together. It has multiple layers in structure.

Secondly, the dataset already exists. One can consider the collection of data as a type of sunken cost. One has to maximize the academic value and social benefits given the fact that the cost has been induced. Then the best strategy is to fully exploit the dataset.

Thirdly, I won't leak the dataset information and will comply with terms of use.

Last but not least, regarding the potential for the result being exploited in discriminating against a certain group of people, academic research focuses on study human being as a whole. No single subject would be analyzed particularly. If one argues that results can be used by other people to analyze a particular person, then the problem he/she has is against the entire social science research. Scientific method can't lose objectiveness.

Reference

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Notes

No single suggestion can avoid being too rigid compared to the dynamic world. But it's so true that we need more interdisciplinary work joined by more people from not only social science field but also from information science, computer science, etc. Under the T3 case, if the research were to recruit members from computation field and researchers working in data science field, they would have made a difference by encoding certain identifiable information. If there's no single standard for the four principles, better anonymization technique and more explicit way of collecting informed consent are two most fundamental techniques for avoiding privacy breaching.